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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 010271

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STATE DEPT FOR WHA/CCA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/15/2016

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SUBJECT: MOTHER OF ALL MARCHES BY CUBA'S "LADIES IN WHITE"

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Classified By: COM Michael Parmly for Reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Cuba's "Ladies in White," relatives of political prisoners, held a successful protest march in Havana on May 13. Seventeen Ladies marched from the house of leading member Laura Pollan to a monument honoring Leonor Diaz, the mother of national hero Jose Marti, and laid flowers to mark Mother's Day. Although Cuban authorities did not block the march, at least six Ladies were prevented from traveling to the capital to take part in the event. The Ladies who marched reported strong support from onlookers. Pollan told us her group has no action planned on May 20, the anniversary of Cuba's independence from Spain. However, Martha Beatriz Roque told us she and other members of the Assembly to Promote Civil Society plan to mark that day with a meeting at either a Havana park, a monument or the waterfront. (Roque also said she received a phone call May 15 from Mario and Lincoln Diaz Balart, expressing Congressional solidarity with Cuban dissidents.) Fellow released 75er Roberto de Miranda plans to mark May 20 with an academic conference, while Oscar Espinosa Chepe plans to send a letter to President Bush. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The "Ladies in White," joint recipients of the European Parliament's 2005 Sakharov Prize, held a peaceful protest march on the eve of Mother's Day (May 13) and laid flowers at a monument to Leonor Diaz, the mother of Jose Marti. Seventeen Ladies took part and were not interrupted by GOC authorities or GOC-directed counter-protestors, as was the case last year. The group convened at the home of leading member Laura Pollan and then walked to the monument, wearing their characteristic white clothing and holding gladiolas. Pollan and other Ladies told us on May 14 and 15 that support from onlookers was robust. At one point, the group marched past a pharmacy and, according to Pollan, "The place emptied out," with workers and shoppers all expressing support for the marchers. Also during the march, Pollan said, the group walked by an Interior Ministry vehicle, and the two officers inside said "congratulations." Regardless of the sincerity of the remark, said Pollan, "There are lots of police and other members of the regime who are in favor of change." The successful march was tempered by the realization that the GOC prevented at least six other Ladies, many from the provinces, from traveling to Havana for one of their biggest events of the year.

MAY 20 PLANS

¶3. (C) Pollan told us the Ladies in White have planned no

specific action on May 20, the anniversary of Cuba's independence from Spain, but plan to stage a longer-than-usual march the following day, after attending Sunday mass at Santa Rita church. (Note: COM attended mass at Santa Rita on May 14 and passed out bunches of roses to the approximately 15 Ladies in attendance. End note.)

¶4. (C) Meanwhile, Martha Beatriz Roque and fellow dissident Miguel Valdez Tamayo told us May 15 that they and other officials of the Assembly to Promote Civil Society, including Felix Bonne, plan to mark May 20 with a meeting at either a Havana park, a monument or the waterfront. Roque also told us that GOC authorities are continuing to intimidate Bonne, whose backyard hosted last year's May 20 dissident meeting organized by the Assembly. Roque said the authorities, who have already started turning the backyard into a public park, are now threatening to strip Bonne of possession of the house, which has been in the possession of his family since before 1959.

¶5. (C) Roque also told us she received a phone call May 15 from Florida Representatives Mario and Lincoln Diaz Balart, expressing Congressional solidarity with Cuban dissidents. She said the Congressmen told her that other Members would call her in the coming days.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

¶6. (C) Probationed 75er Roberto de Miranda told us May 15 that he plans to mark May 20 by hosting an academic conference at his house, attended by an estimated 10 to 15 educators. Fellow 75er Oscar Espinosa Chepe told the COM May 14 he hopes to send a letter to President Bush, addressing the human rights situation here and outlining steps for progress. Two other self-described dissidents, Orlando Fundora and Hugo Leon Azcuy, planned to hold a five-day hunger strike starting on May 20. The end of the hunger strike would coincide with the death anniversary of Pedro

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Luis Boitel, a Cuban hunger striker who died in prison and remains a symbol of resistance to the Castro regime. Dissident labor leaders are holding a training seminar on May 24. Leading activist Oswaldo Paya, the Christian Liberation Movement (MCL) chief who last week released a draft of a democratic transition plan and Constitution, has said he has no specific plans to mark May 20.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) In a community where Government infiltration is the rule rather than the exception, it is unsurprising that most pro-democracy activists are keeping quiet about their May 20 plans. We do not anticipate any dissident event nearly as large or organized as last year's Assembly, held at Bonne's home.
PARMLY